

# Creativity through adversity: Kansas exhibition explores Jimmy Tsutomu Mirikitani's life and work

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Annabel Keenan

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Jimmy Tsutomu Mirikitani's *untitled (World Trade Center, peace)* (after 2001) Collection of Linda Hattendorf, Taos, New Mexico

Largely under recognised during his lifetime, the US artist Jimmy Tsutomu Mirikitani (1920-2012) is earning his due in the largest presentation of his work to date, at the Spencer Museum of Art in Kansas. Spanning drawing, collage and mixed media, *Street Nihonga: The Art of Jimmy Tsutomu Mirikitani* will highlight a life and creative practice transformed by displacement, trauma and resilience.

Born in Sacramento in 1920 and raised in Hiroshima, Mirikitani trained in *Nihonga*, or Japanese-style painting, before returning to the US in 1940. Throughout his life, Mirikitani faced significant adversities, including wartime incarceration for having Japanese ancestry, and homelessness. Against this backdrop, his creative output flourished as a way to survive amid periods of global and personal crisis. Mirikitani's work became a form of self-determination as he worked through trauma, depicting scenes ranging from the burning World Trade Center buildings to colourful landscapes and portraits of cats. Mirikitani brought Japanese aesthetics to the streets, and created art in public parks, often collaborating with neighbours and strangers.



1925  
三月九日  
三子  
三子



Jimmy Tsutomu Mirikitani's *Untitled (World Trade Center and Kannon)* (after 2001) Courtesy Spencer Museum of Art

“Mirikitani’s work feels urgently relevant today,” says the exhibition’s co-curator, Maki Kaneko. “His art speaks directly to issues that continue to shape our world—racism, migration, statelessness, war and homelessness—yet it does so through deeply personal and interpersonal forms. In a moment when society feels increasingly divided, Mirikitani’s practice offers a powerful model of art as connection, dialogue and shared coexistence.”

Mirikitani died in 2012 and, while he was not widely known during his lifetime, he gained visibility in 2006 with the documentary *The Cats of Mirikitani*, in which the film-maker Linda Hattendorf gave the then-unhoused Mirikitani shelter and helped him find stable housing. The exhibition draws mainly from Hattendorf’s collection. Though Mirikitani’s work does not often appear on the secondary market, he is in a handful of museum collections, including the Spencer Museum and the Smithsonian American Art Museum.



Jimmy Tsutomu Mirikitani's *untitled (mother cat and baby cat)* (date unknown) Collection of Linda Hattendorf, Taos, New Mexico

“The Spencer Museum has a long commitment to global Modern and contemporary art, works on paper and Asian art histories, but this exhibition allows us to rethink those categories together,” says the co-curator Kris Ercums. “Today, there is a growing recognition that Mirikitani’s art demands a more serious reassessment. He is increasingly understood not simply as a ‘self-taught’ or ‘outsider’ artist, but as a deeply intentional maker.”

The museum hopes visitors will approach the exhibition with an open mind and see Mirikitani’s work as a form of expression born in the unstable spaces between nations, conflict and communities.



Jimmy Tsutomu Mirikitani's *untitled (family portraits)*, date unknown Collection of Linda Hattendorf, Taos, New Mexico

“The exhibition does not ask viewers to arrive at a specific takeaway or resolution, but to enter into a process—to look closely, make connections, and reflect on how meaning is formed through collaboration and encounter,” Kaneko says. “What each visitor takes away may differ, and that openness is very much in the spirit of Mirikitani’s practice.”

- [Street Nihonga: The Art of Jimmy Tsutomu Mirikitani](#), Spencer Museum of Art, Lawrence, Kansas, 19 February-28 June

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